

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 18: Final Assessment and Conclusion

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Final Assessment and Conclusion

Before Greg Bahnsen's death, Christian apologist John Frame hailed him as "one of the sharpest apologists working today," opining that "he is the best debater among Christian apologists of all apologetic persuasions." (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, p. 392) [Elsewhere](#) he says that Bahnsen was "singularly gifted for the spiritual warfare of our time" by the Christian god, and perhaps because of this divine endowment, "Bahnsen still has no peer." "Bahnsen's mind is razor sharp," says Blake White in his brief [review of *Always Ready*](#). [Another source](#) refers to Bahnsen as "the man atheists fear most."

Given this noteworthy adulation, one would suppose that, if anyone can tackle "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'," it would be Greg Bahnsen. And many Christian warriors would probably agree with this, supposing that books like *Always Ready* and its 31st chapter are quintessential armaments against the Christian worldview's critics and the objections they raise. "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural,'" then, gives us a firsthand look at how this amply lauded apologist addresses a matter of fundamental importance to the Christian worldview.

As I pointed out at [the beginning](#) of my examination of Bahnsen's chapter on "Knowing the 'Super-Natural'," Christianity's defenders are prone to characterizing the non-believer's rejection of "the supernatural" as a symptom of some unjustifiable "bias" or unfair "prejudice" which precludes an honest hearing of the case for supernaturalism or validation of knowledge whose source is in "the supernatural." But if it turns out that, when the defense they offer for the notion of "the supernatural" is full of gaping holes and missed opportunities, as we find in the case of Bahnsen's treatment of the issue, such charges are shown to have no credibility whatsoever. Over and over we find that Bahnsen ignores fundamental questions to the point that it becomes clear that he is seeking to evade them. This became clear by reviewing his attempt to deal with "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'" with a few basic questions germane to the topic of the chapter in mind, such as:

How can one "know" what the believer calls "the supernatural"?

By what means does the believer have awareness of what he calls "the supernatural"?

How does the believer distinguish what he calls "the supernatural" (or "God") from what he may merely be imagining?

How is "revelation" as applied to the bible different from simply assuming that the stories in the bible are true?

Etc.

Add to this list the question of how the notion of "the supernatural" is compatible with the principle of objectivity, the primacy of existence metaphysics, and rational philosophy in general, and we find that Bahnsen simply did not do his homework on the issue.

Instead of addressing questions of this nature, Bahnsen expends much of his energy baldly asserting Christian dogma as if it were self-evidently true and trying to discredit rival positions, as if doing so will somehow resolve "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'." At no point does he validate the notion of "the supernatural," explain why we should believe it is anything other than imaginary, identify the means by which man can have awareness of it, or show how belief in "the supernatural" is compatible with the principle of objectivity and rational philosophy.

Upon close examination of what Bahnsen does present, we find numerous new problems instead of any

resolutions, such as:

1. Bahnsen nowhere identifies in clear terms the starting point which grounds a “comprehensive metaphysic” suitable for man, the means by which one might have awareness of its starting point, or the process by which one can know that its starting point could be true.
2. Bahnsen’s conception of “supernatural” (“whatever surpasses the limits of nature”) is too open-ended for his own apologetic interests. It does not specify any actual thing, and could apply to anything one imagines. To accept “the supernatural” on Bahnsen’s conception of it, would be to accept not only Christianity’s supernatural beings, but also those of other religions, since - like Christianity’s supernatural agents - the supernatural agents of other mystical worldviews likewise “surpass the limits of nature.” Also, in practical matters, “whatever surpasses the limits of nature” quite often spells danger and disaster for man.
3. Bahnsen nowhere enlightens his readers on how they can know “the supernatural,” even though the very title of the 31st chapter of his book suggests that this is something he would be setting out to do in that chapter.
4. Bahnsen totally neglects the issue of how one might have awareness of what he calls “the supernatural.” He notes at many points that one does not have awareness of “the supernatural” by means of sense-perception, or by any empirical mode of awareness. However, this only tells us how we do not have awareness of “the supernatural.” It leaves completely unstated how one does have awareness of “the supernatural,” if in fact he claims to have such awareness. Bahnsen resists identifying what that mode of awareness is.
5. Bahnsen’s theology entails knowledge acquired and held by a passive, inactive mind, which is a contradiction in terms. The “knowledge” in question is the “knowledge of the supernatural” that Christians claim to have as a consequence of divine revelation, which is characterized as the Christian god coming to man rather than man “speculating” or “groping” his way to it through some cognitive activity.
6. Bahnsen promulgates a most tiresome and outworn dichotomy: either the mind is passive and inactive in its acquisition of knowledge (since its “revealed” to him by supernatural spirits), or he is left with “arbitrary speculations.” This arbitrary dilemma ignores the very faculty by which man acquires and validates knowledge in the first place, namely reason.
7. Bahnsen provides no indication of how one can confidently distinguish “the supernatural” from what he is imagining. If there is a difference, then the ability to distinguish them is of vital concern, since neither “the supernatural” nor the constructs of one’s imagination exist in the “here and now,” are beyond the testimony of the senses, and “surpass the limits of nature.” In other words, since the imaginary and “the supernatural” look and behave very much alike, the absence of an objective process by which the one can be reliably distinguished from the other indicates a glaring epistemological oversight of enormous proportions, suggesting that our leg is being pulled.
8. Bahnsen exhibits a hesitant fickleness regarding the role of inference in knowing “the supernatural.” Is his god’s existence inferred from objectively verifiable facts (if yes, from what objectively verifiable facts?), or directly known (if yes, by what mode of awareness?)? At times he seems to be affirming the former, at others the latter. At no point is he explicit in how exactly the human mind can have knowledge of a being which “surpasses the limits of nature.”
9. Bahnsen expends much energy focusing his readers’ attention on purported failings of non-believing worldviews, even though they are irrelevant to explaining how one can acquire and validate knowledge of “the supernatural.” The detection of internal problems within Logical Positivism, for instance, is not a proof of the existence of “the supernatural,” nor does it serve to inform any epistemological basis to suppose that “the supernatural” is real.
10. Bahnsen seems resentful of epistemologies which take sense perception as a starting point - that is, as the fundamental operation of consciousness upon which knowledge of reality depends - but nowhere identifies any clear alternative. Indeed, he seems not to have thought this through very well at all. For upon analysis it becomes clear that “special revelation” (i.e., accepting whatever the bible says as truth) requires sense perception in order to “read the book,” and “general revelation” (i.e., inferring the Christian god’s existence and/or message from what we discover in nature) also involves sense

perception (as a mode of awareness of nature) as well as at least in part consulting “internal evidences” - which could be feelings, wishes, imagination, hopes, etc. So there is strong evidence here of an ad hoc approach to epistemology as such.

11. Bahnsen is oblivious of how conceptualization works. This can be attributed to the fact that Christianity does not have its own theory of concept-formation. Specifically, much of his case against supernaturalism’s detractors demonstrates that he does not understand the relationship between the perceptual level of awareness and the conceptual activity. For instance, Bahnsen supposes that a comprehensive metaphysics cannot be based ultimately on sense experience because sense experience is “limited.” But concepts allow a thinker to expand his awareness beyond what he personally experiences and while still basing his knowledge ultimately on what he experiences. So the conflict against which Bahnsen reacts is really due to his own ignorance of the nature of concepts.
12. Bahnsen shows that he must appeal to the supernatural in order to validate the supernatural, which is terminally circular.
13. Elements in Bahnsen’s case are incompatible with elements that are part of the worldview which he is trying to defend (e.g., that appearances are distinct from reality, and yet “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen” per Romans 1:20).

So instead of providing an objectively reliable answer to the problem he purports to be addressing in the 31st chapter of his book *Always Ready*, Bahnsen relies on a list of cheap gimmicks and blaring gaffs that carry him haphazardly into areas that no careful thinker would want to go. Persisting throughout the chapter is Bahnsen’s ignorance of the relationship between the perceptual and the conceptual levels of human consciousness. In fact, it is this relationship that is key to unraveling many of Bahnsen’s confusions over issues such as the purported dichotomy between appearance and reality (which Bahnsen raises, but does not explain or resolve), the *conceptual* (as opposed to “empirical”) nature of knowledge, the fundamental weaknesses of Logical Positivism, and a host of other related issues. In typical presuppositionalist fashion, Bahnsen seeks to exploit this ignorance, which he shares with many unwitting non-believers as well, in a concerted effort to turn the spotlight from the problem which he should be addressing in his chapter (given its title), to problems which he perceives in rival worldviews. But anyone should be able to recognize that pointing out a problem in someone else’s position does nothing to validate the claim that “the supernatural” is real and that “knowledge” of it is legitimate. Exposing fundamental errors in Logical Positivism, no matter how egregious they may be, will not explain Bahnsen allegedly acquiring knowledge of what he calls “the supernatural.”

But in spite of these problems which should be obvious to any critical thinker, we still find that many are charmed by Bahnsen’s sophistry. Blake White, for instance, in [his review of *Always Ready*](#), tells us that

Bahnsen spends a lot of time on epistemology and the need for a truly Christian theory of knowledge.

What contribution does Bahnsen make on the topic of epistemology when he doesn’t address the fundamental questions pertaining to “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’,” and how do the gimmicks, fallacies and evasions listed above address man’s need for a theory of knowledge? Contrary to what White tells his readers, Bahnsen gives us *at best* an epistemology of utter negligence.

In conclusion, then, we can with certainty say that any appeal to the supernatural is irrational. This is because supernaturalism assumes the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, which constitutes a crass departure from the reality-based orientation to the world which makes rationality possible in the first place. In addition to this, appeals to supernaturalism fail to identify how the content of its claims can be established in a manner consistent with the nature of the human mind and its cognitive functions; they fail to identify the means by which one can acquire awareness of that which is allegedly “supernatural,” how claims that supernatural beings exist can be validated, and how such claims can be tested for their supposed truth value. Adherents to supernaturalism are quick to point to the means by which supernatural claims are *not* validated or tested, but fail to identify the means by which they *could be* validated and tested. Furthermore, adherents to supernaturalism fail to provide a method for distinguishing what they call “the supernatural” and what they may merely be imagining, thus priming the mind of one who is prone to believing supernatural claims for compromising fact with fantasy. As evidence of these points indicating the irrationality of supernaturalism, adherents of supernaturalism inevitably find that they need to appeal to their supernaturalism in order to defend their supernaturalism, which is viciously circular and therefore fallacious. So not only is supernaturalism by virtue of its nature and content irrational, it also invites the call for fallacy in its defenses. To accuse non-supernaturalists of an “unjust bias” for their rejection of supernaturalism, then, is consequently also irrational, indeed hypocritical.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Always Ready](#), [Knowledge](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)

1 Comments:

[Singh](#) said...

The great flaw in your whole continuing thread is your constant claims that Bahnsen does this...Bahnsen does that...without adequate (or, in many cases ANY) references to where EXACTLY he does this.

And knowing how much you despise Christians, from your remarks on other blogs, I am certainly not going to place any "faith" in your representing him correctly.

[September 25, 2007 6:00 AM](#)

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